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ABSTRACT

Recent research by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium has led to the development of a resiliency model that helps explain why some at-risk students actually do well in school. The recent investigations have determined that some students develop traits that enable them to be successful in school. The model suggests that four environmental factors come together to form a psychological support system that reinforces the personal traits that lead to resilience. This support system is composed of: (1) significant relationships with adults; (2) positive use of time; (3) motivation through encouragement and high expectations; and (4) acknowledgment through recognition and accomplishment. The support system enhances the development of personal traits such as self-efficacy, goal orientation, personal responsibility, optimism, internal expectations, and coping ability. The resiliency model can be operationalized in schools, beginning with awareness of the model and dissemination of its concepts. A school that decides to implement the four factors of the model must analyze its own performance and then identify the strategies that will bring about these objectives. There are no quick and easy answers to solving the problems of at-risk students, but putting the factors of the resiliency model into place provides a process schools can use to develop a favorable climate. (SLD)

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Research Brief #19

November 1994

DEVELOPING RESILIENT SCHOOLS AND RESILIENT STUDENTS

The purpose of this research brief is to promote the dissemination of knowledge in a format that may provide educators with new insights that will result in decisions and strategies that enable schools to be provide climates that support the developing of resiliency in at-risk students. The brief 1) describes the resiliency model, 2) projects the model's anticipated student and school outcomes, 3) operationalizes the model, and 4) describes a process schools can use to implement the model.

The information contained in this research brief is not a set of clear cut instructions for creating environments that support the development of resiliency in students. Rather, it operationalizes the resiliency model offered by McMillan and Reed (1993) and offers an implementation process which schools can use to implement the model in their setting.

THE RESILIENCY MODEL

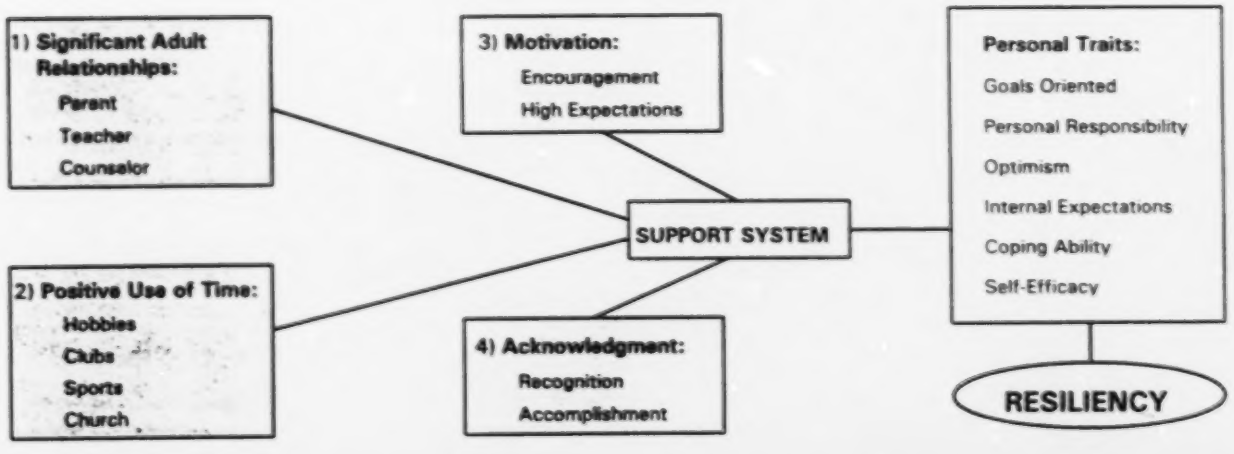
MERC's recent investigation of at-risk students concluded that some at-risk students have developed traits that enable them to be successful in school (McMillan and Reed, 1993). The study also offered a conceptual model demonstrating how four environmental factors come together to form a psychological support system that reinforces the personal traits leading to resiliency (see figure 1).

The psychological support system is composed of a combination of significant relationships with adults, positive use of time, motivation (through encouragement and high expectations), and acknowledgment (by recognition and accomplishment). The support system enhances the development of personal traits such as: self-efficacy, goals, personal responsibility, optimism, internal expectations, and coping ability. It is these personal traits, the study found, that lead to resiliency.

At-risk students need support in all areas of their lives—including their academic lives. Having the support they need is an essential first step in developing resiliency and academic success. As the model in Figure 1 illustrates, adult relationships, positive use of time, motivation, and acknowledgment are the key elements of a vital system of support for at-risk students.

Figure 1

Developing Resiliency in Students



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RESILIENT STUDENTS

In the long term, schools which have developed a supportive climate by the combination and interaction of the above four components, increase the chance that more at-risk students develop important positive personality traits leading to resiliency which enable them to successfully complete their education and become productive citizens. The six traits of resilient students are briefly described below.

Self-efficacy. The student feels that he or she is successful because they have chosen to be so, and they give themselves credit for accomplishments.

Goals oriented. The student is able to articulate clear, realistic, long term goals and wishes.

Personal responsibility. The student possesses an internal locus of control for their success and failures. Poor performance is attributed to internal factors such as a lack of effort, not caring, not trying, not studying as much as they need to, goofing off, and playing around. The students did not believe school, neighborhood, or family was critical in either their successes or failures.

Optimism. The student demonstrates that they are motivated to do well and are optimistic about the future. He or she has hope, despite all the negative circumstances in their life. The student also has confidence that they can achieve their long range goals.

Internal expectations. The student is able to relate success to effort and ability and demonstrates a willingness to take responsibility for their actions.

Coping ability. The student is more able to cope with stress, resolve personal problems, and keep their focus on doing well in school. When there are problems or difficulties these students are willing to reach out for help.

RESILIENT SCHOOLS

Schools can expect that once such a resiliency model's support system is implemented and reinforced overtime it will lead to the development of resiliency in all students and in particular at-risk students. Schools can also anticipate that more at-risk students will become resilient and successfully complete their education. It is also our expectation that:

Schools which encourage parents, teachers, counselors and administrators to develop **significant adult relationships** with at-risk students increase the chance that their students will become more resilient.

Schools which provide opportunities for at-risk students to make **use of their time by involving themselves in positive endeavors** such as clubs, hobbies, sports, and church activities increase the chance that their students will become resilient.

Schools which **motivate students** through encouragement and by setting high expectations increase the chance that their students will become resilient.

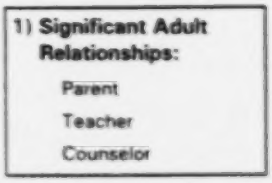
Schools which **recognize and acknowledge** when a student has problems, as well as when the student accomplishes something positive, increase the chance that their students will become resilient.

THE RESILIENCY MODEL OPERATIONALIZED

The resiliency model requires the development of a support system. The support system's four environmental factors are operationalized below to provide guidelines to schools that wish to develop school climates supportive of developing resiliency in at-risk students. The components are defined and illustrated through examples from school systems which have already employed some of the four factors.

Significant Adult Relationships.

Schools that encourage parents, teachers, counselors and administrators to develop significant adult relationships with at-risk students increase the chance that their students will become more resilient.



Judith Jones (1989) says "There is growing evidence that the involvement and caring of even one adult in the life of an at-risk child can prevent lifelong disadvantage". It is very important for **parents** to form a significant relationship with their child. Meaningful ways for parents to become involved in their child's life include:

- Assisting with homework and reviewing assignments
- Consulting with the teacher
- Assisting with schedule planning
- Serving as a resource person
- Assisting in the classroom
- Initiating conferences
- Providing study time and a good study environment

- Providing educational resources
- Modeling appropriate skills and behaviors
- Blending education and family activities
- Talking about goals
- Visiting classes
- Reinforcing skills

These methods for parental involvement are a part of many effective school programs to help at-risk students. For example, the Effective Parenting Information for Children (or EPIC) is a district-wide program in Binghamton, NY that helps parents of children in pre-K through grade 5 develop their parenting skills. This program includes also activities for both parents and children to help them develop their communication skills. Workshops for parents, teachers, and support staff in how to help students develop self-esteem are also offered, as are referral services.

In addition to parents, **teachers and counselors** exert tremendous influence on students' education and attitudes toward school. Therefore, a concerted effort must continually be made to select and train good teachers and counselors who are sensitive to the needs of at-risk students. At-risk students are helped by school leaders who stress academic achievement, maintain an orderly and disciplined environment, and instill positive values and self-confidence in students as part of a total positive school climate.

Several school programs illustrate how schools can develop significant adult relationships with their students. A program developed in Washington state recognized and addressed the prominent affect counselors can have on students. As part of their program, students were given opportunities to discuss their problems with counselors and to seek help in dealing with them. Small support groups met frequently and focused on giving the at-risk student a feeling that the group cared.

The Mentor/Advocate Program in Eugene, Oregon is another program that stresses the importance of significant adult relationships in the lives of at-risk students. The program pairs students at-risk in several elementary and middle schools with adult volunteers—counselors, teachers, or other staff members. The adults become "buddies," tutors, and role models for students who otherwise may not have such models in their lives.

The positive effect of adult role models is also the basis for an "Operation Pride" Program in Wisconsin. In this program, one teacher is assigned as a mentor during each of the periods of the school day. Students report to the teacher's room in lieu of study hall, where the teacher seeks to enhance the self-image of students and improve achievement, classroom behavior and attitudes.

Many at-risk students are estranged from school. To overcome this some schools have established an advisory system that demonstrates that teachers and administrators are concerned with their well being. The sense of belonging to a community many times encourages students to come to school.

Positive Use of Time

Schools that provide opportunities for at-risk students to make use of their time by involving themselves in positive endeavors such as clubs, hobbies, sports, and church activities increase the chance that their students will become resilient.

2) Positive Use of Time:
- Hobbies
- Clubs
- Sports
- Church

Extracurricular activities need to be expanded and greatly promoted in schools where there are large populations of at-risk students. These activities seem to increase involvement and membership in school. However, many at-risk students will not voluntarily participate in activities because of their general feelings of disconnectedness. Teachers and administrators must develop needed programs and **systematically issue personal invitations** for at-risk students to join. These programs should include the usual school clubs such as drama, choir, "Future Teachers," "Future Farmers," and others. They should also include support groups for various concerns such as adolescent mothers, victims of abuse, children of alcoholic parents, children of incarcerated parents, and others.

Involvement in athletics as an educational tool to enhance academic resilience and attachment in at-risk students should not be ignored. Activities associated with sports should be expanded to allow both athletes and non-athletes more opportunities to experience academic benefits. For example, both players and non-players could write contributions to sports columns in order to enhance writing and language skills and collect and analyze player statistics to enhance mathematical skills. Sports could be incorporated into the English, mathematics, science, and social studies programs of elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Older students may also be interested in participating in sports debate teams and sports enthusiast clubs. These

activities combine students' existing interests with academics.

It is also important that schools initiate collaborative efforts to develop and administer programs to help kids effectively use their time. Programs that are jointly planned and administered by schools, communities, churches, and families are needed because they all influence what and how much students learn as well as whether or not they attend school.

An example of a constructive program that allows students to use their time in a positive way utilizes students as "natural helpers." The students make quality use of their time by participating as peer counselors to help other students recover from chemical abuse. This strategy was successful and has since become widely used.

Motivation

Schools that motivate students through encouragement and by setting high expectations increase the chance that their students will become resilient.

3) Motivation:
Encouragement
High Expectations

Teachers and administrators need to be provided with training and encouragement to develop the attitudes and behaviors that are most beneficial to at-risk children. These students need teachers and administrators who are sensitive to students, respectful, caring, honest, patient, open-minded, and firm. They also need teachers who understand learning styles, expect positive results, and recognize cultural norms and differences. Professional preparation programs and in-service programs offering special seminars or classes on working with at-risk populations should be available.

Encouragement. For parents, teachers, and counselors, encouraging a child includes behaviors such as promoting writing at home, encouraging improvement, and catching students succeeding. Adults should remember to watch their praise to make sure it is pertinent and on-the-spot, chart their feedback, and give negative feedback in positive ways.

Resilient students seem to understand that when they need help they should ask for it. Teaching activities need to be utilized that will encourage "help-seeking" as an adaptive skill for coping with the academic stress of many at-risk students. These students will often continue to work unsuccessfully on a task without help, despite the availability of more productive strategies.

Perhaps these students are forestalling judgments of failure. Instead, they need to be taught that there are times when help-seeking can provide solutions that will ensure success. Help-seeking can then be regarded as a sign of motivation because the students are actively using available human resources when they need them.

Resilient students are able to do this, unlike most at-risk students. Teachers can teach at-risk students to ask for and seek help when their own independent efforts have failed. Students need to understand the costs of not seeking help and be assured that learning in the classroom is not merely an individual endeavor but is supported by adults and other students in the classroom.

The Binghamton School Partnership Project in New York understands the importance of encouragement. In fact, the project's basic goal is to promote the belief that all children can learn through encouragement and positive reinforcement.

Additionally, a Washington State program for at-risk students incorporates encouragement into their program in several ways. First, they provide encouragement to students through tutoring. The individualized assistance with homework also helped compensate for lack of parent support and encouragement at home.

A second method they used is continuous program enrollment. This plan stipulates that a student in need of assistance need not wait for the beginning of the school term to enter into an intervention program. Students are encouraged to seek assistance early.

A third way they provided encouragement is through their advocacy program. Students were made aware that if they were experiencing difficulties with regular coursework or with the requirements of the school and classroom, a teacher would be available to help and encourage them.

Other schools rely on the "intervene early" rule and realize that encouragement must come at an early age for these at-risk students. Educators must monitor the early academic and social progress of children carefully. If help is not provided early, the academic failure experienced by a child can wear away their self-esteem. Helping children develop competence and confidence in their ability to learn is a good way to instill a desire to learn and to prepare for a lifetime of learning.

High Expectations. Research consistently shows that educators who motivate students by expecting them to maintain high standards for attendance, academics and behavior get more in return. Expect the best and you're

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likely to get it. Expectations, however, must be realistic and at-risk students must receive the support they need to meet them.

Teachers need to be trained and encouraged to provide classroom activities and classroom environments that stress academic achievement while also building students' self-esteem and self-confidence. The classroom environment should facilitate time-on-task, student interaction, student success, and positive reinforcement for desired classroom behaviors. Positive experiences in school and classroom activities give the resilient students a sense of belonging, bonding, and encouragement.

Purkey and Novak (1984) say it is essential to develop an invitational climate. The essential attributes of such a climate are: ensuring time-on-task, facilitating a high degree of student interaction, providing high reinforcement for desired classroom behavior, maintaining high expectations, inviting success, and establishing a cooperative learning environment.

Instructional strategies and techniques must also be developed that will promote a sense of internal locus of control. Resilient students have spoken of satisfaction gained from experiencing success in self-fulfilling activities. These activities also increase the motivation to achieve. At-risk students need to have visible and concrete displays of success in order for them to see the progress that has been made. Teachers should establish reference points where achievement will be identified, and they must continually relate success to effort and ability.

A technique used by one school program is contract courses. In a meeting with an instructor, a student is given assignments along with a contract. The student pledges that he or she will fulfill the terms of the contract, which includes frequent meetings to review progress and expectations.

Cooperative learning addresses the needs for power, inclusion, belonging, and fun in the classroom. Positive group dynamics can result and learner satisfaction with the class can increase. Cooperative learning approaches facilitate the achievement of important educational outcomes. These approaches lead to "higher achievement, greater interpersonal relations among students, more positive attitudes toward the subject studied, and a stronger belief that one is liked and supported by other students" (Savage, 1991). These findings, which appear to be consistent across grade levels, are certainly desirable for at-risk children and should help them to become more resilient.

Acknowledgment

4) Acknowledgment:
Recognition
Accomplishment

Schools that recognize and acknowledge when a student has problems, as well as when the student accomplishes something positive increase the chance that their students will develop resiliency.

Recognition. A student will feel part of a support system and will have increased self-esteem when teachers and others provide the student with recognition. Recognition is furnished when parents and educators employ the following techniques:

- Speak with respect to every student, as if each were the best student and a friend
- Communicate feelings about the value of a student's friendship
- See when the student is "down," and indicate that they notice, care, and are willing to help
- Listen to students, tell students of their intention to make time for listening
- Set specific appointments with students to visit in private, and keep their part of the appointment, even if the student fails to show up
- Show students that they are interested not only in school work, but also in students' lives outside school, such as their hobbies, interests, and home or peer-related problems
- Encourage students to share their personal experiences with them
- Always talk and act as if they believe students are capable (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

In addition to the above suggestions, smaller classes are helpful in allowing teachers to recognize individuals. More individual attention and interaction among students is available as is an increased opportunity for the teacher to better know and understand the students.

The "Instep Program" is a good example of a program that concentrates on recognizing individual students. Instep's effort is based on one-to-one relationships, where at-risk students are given prime attention from school counselors to raise their attendance records and academic achievement.

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While imperative, simply recognizing the needs of the children, however, is not enough. Schools must provide a broad range of instructional programs to accommodate students with diverse needs. The same program cannot be expected to benefit children with different problems and needs. Several programs that provide a variety of forms of assistance are most beneficial.

Accomplishment. It is crucial for at-risk students to have a feeling of accomplishment. The good behaviors of these students need to be acknowledged, however, in order to reinforce their achievement. Praising good performance in school as well as in other areas of the student's life is critical. Teachers need to set and track personal goals and accomplishments and put them in writing, post examples of good work, and not hesitate to praise a whole group of students (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989). Recognition for accomplishments and praise are two potent forces for an individual's self-esteem. Suggestions for teachers and other staff members include:

- Praise a student's breakthrough or the overcoming of difficulties
- Provide awards for student improvement in behavior and achievement
- Create opportunities for students to write praise letters to other students, teachers, the principal, parents, and the support staff
- Praise specific tasks, not necessarily the individual who performed them
- Stress the positive aspects of students with other teachers
- Phone parents to give positive praise, and pass on facts about a student's improvement in achievement and behavior
- Prepare bulletin board displays that feature students' good work in the classroom, in the school, and in the community (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

IMPLEMENTING THE RESILIENCY MODEL IN SCHOOLS

The development of a concise conceptual model is a vital first step in the creating school climates that support the development of resilient students. Equally important is a complete understanding of each ingredient of the model—ingredients that, when combined, steer students toward academic success. However, the development and understanding of a model are necessary to improve the plight of at-risk students, they are not sufficient. They constitute only the beginning of a critical and time-consuming implementation process.

The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium's (MERC) study group on resilient at-risk students developed a process for schools interested in replicating and implementing the resiliency model. The study group members (Carl Chapin, Cindy Henshaw, Glenn Miller, Carole Urbansok-Eades, Clarence Nicholas, and John Pisapia) projected five phases that a school must go through to provide a climate that supports the development of resiliency in their at-risk students. The phases are: awareness, analysis, strategies, action, and evaluation.

Awareness

Awareness of the resiliency model is the first step of implementation. School personnel need to become aware of the research and the conceptual model in depth and begin to internalize the concepts.

- Know the characteristics that put students at-risk
- Recognize that at-risk students can be successful
- Know the size of the at-risk population in the school
- Know which problems specifically face the at-risk students at your school
- Understand the notion of resiliency
- Understand students need positive adult relationships
- Understand students need to make positive use of their time
- Understand students need to be motivated
- Understand students need to be acknowledged
- Know what personality traits lead to resiliency.

Equally important is understanding the **readiness** of the school to consider an implementation. Key questions should be asked and answered within each school. For example,

- What is the role of the Principal and the implementation team in our school?
- What do we know about the educational change process and how does this affect our situation?

- What aspects of the model do we want to implement in our school? Do we use a holistic approach or component approach?
- What underlying conditions must be present for the resiliency model to work? How can we clarify and communicate them in our school?

Concepts must be clarified at the outset; all members involved must share the same clear definition of the process and its desired end result. The parameters and conditions for responsibility and authority also need to be clarified.

- What can we learn from other schools about implementing programs to develop resiliency in at-risk students.
- What happens if we cannot decide an issue?

Analysis

If, after going through the awareness phase, the school decides to continue the implementation of the resiliency model, they must begin to analyze where the school lies in regard to the operationalized model and what discrepancies exist. Schools should prepare a data base of school conditions related to the resiliency model as they now exist.

- Does the school facilitate meaningful relationships between students and parents, teachers, counselors, and/or other important adults?
- Does the school provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful extracurricular activities?
- Do teachers and counselors encourage students to do their best and to become involved?
- Do teachers and counselors set realistic high expectations for their students?
- Do teachers and counselors recognize students achievements and problems?
- Do teachers and counselors acknowledge students' accomplishments and allow students to succeed whenever possible?
- What programs to build resiliency are currently being implemented in the school?
- What resources does the school have to fund programs?

Based on the information received in the awareness stage and analyzed in the analysis stage, the school must make a decision to continue or to abort the implementation. If the decision is to continue, then the implementation team should forge a mission and develop a set of core values which will guide the implementation. Then strategies to put the resiliency model in place should be developed.

Strategies

Schools must identify potential strategies to put the model in place and determine what they need to implement the model. Schools must prepare for the realities of change. The impact of change on all individuals involved must be consciously considered and a wide variety of intervention strategies must be offered.

- On what areas of the resiliency model does our school need to concentrate first? What goals and objectives should we establish?
- What appropriate and effective strategies should we adopt to support the four environmental factors of the resiliency model at our school?
- What new roles will teachers, administrators, parents and students be asked to assume in the resiliency model? They must be trained to function successfully in these roles. What training and materials are needed for the planned strategies?
- What are the available sources of funding and staffing? Must the use of time and scheduling in the school be rethought?

After considering these guiding questions, schools need to develop an organized plan of action. Segments of such a plan might include:

- Stating the need, concern, or opportunity in specific terms
- Identifying the ideal outcome
- Describing the gap between the present situation and the desired outcome
- Determining the activities that will enable you to accomplish the desired goal
- Determining needed resources
- Identifying who is responsible
- Setting milestones
- Determining how the activities will be evaluated

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Action

Schools have to put the strategies in place by obtaining funding, training school personnel, hiring help from outside the school, and verifying and confirming that action is taking place.

The realities of implementing the resiliency model include:

- Some strategies will take longer because many more people are involved
- Some strategies will work and some will fail
- The focus must be on problem resolution and not placing blame
- Refinement of the process and strategies must be continuous and based on experience
- Openness and candor will enable staff members to solve real problems and to implement changes that will make a difference

It is recommended that schools:

- Provide on-going and continuous staff development
- Consult with people who are directly affected by the decision to implement the resiliency model
- Post a weekly agenda
- Establish a calendar for the year to schedule activities
- Encourage staff, student, and parent input through a suggestion box
- Be sensitive that decisions made today may need to be reviewed in the future

Evaluation

Resiliency schools must use evaluation as an on-going process that ascertains the progression and effectiveness of the implementation process. The following guiding questions should be reviewed annually along with the action plan.

- Are fewer students dropping out of school?
- Are at-risk students showing academic improvement?
- Are teachers and counselors more involved with their students—both on an academic and personal level?
- Do students feel more connected with the school?
- Do at-risk students have goals and confidence in their ability to achieve those goals?

SUMMARY

There are no easy answers or quick-fix solutions to the complex problems confronting at-risk students today. The information contained in this research brief is not a set of clear cut instructions for implementing reform. Rather, it describes the factors that need to be in place to support the development of resiliency in at-risk students and then provides a process by which school communities can go about the work of developing such a climate so more at-risk students will succeed in completing their academic programs.

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Answers to questions found in this research brief have been synthesized from the publications listed below. To obtain a copy, please contact the MERC office.

McMillan, J. H., Reed, D. R., & Bishop, A. (1992, June). A qualitative study of resilient at-risk students: Review of literature. 58 pp. ($3.50).

McMillan, J. H., & Reed, D. R. (1993, January). Defying the odds: A study of resilient at-risk students. 86 pp. ($8.50).

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